Sightlines

ARTICLES

Cindy Sherman: Interview with a Chameleon

by
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Cindy Sherman is the more comfortable in front of a camera than a retrospective. Interviews with the artist are meaningful, too, when perhaps is fitting given how thoroughly she obscures herself in her photographs. However, she did talk with a few journalists, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s art critic Kenneth Baker, in conjunction with Cindy Sherman, the retrospective organized by the Walker Art Center, which ran from 1987 to 1989. February and traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art before its presentation at the Walker. Baker's interview is printed here with permission from the *Chronicle*.

For six months in 2011, Cindy Sherman held the distinction of having made the pricier photograph ever sold at auction. It fetched $3,890,500. Two years earlier, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art certified Sherman as the preeminent artist in a column that includes David Salle, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Sherrie Levine. This year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York installed Sherman's electrifying career retrospective, making here the most recognized female name—and least recognized face, because disguise is her mother—in the contemporary art world. Sherman, 58, was born in New Jersey and, after a brief stint at Buffalo State College, moved to New York in 1977. Her late '70s black-and-white "Untitled Film Stills," in them, she posed, bewigged and costumed, assuming the roles of actresses in hypothetical B movies. Today, these modest pictures look like classics, though they clearly foreshadow the extremes to which Sherman would take the invention of characters in full color in the years since.

Drawing from many sources and expertly handling makeup, costumes, and lighting without assistance, Sherman has produced scores of works—commonly entitled—known by nicknames such as "Social Diva," "Green," "Centerfolds," and "society pictures." In the process, she has taken the artifice of photography to new levels of scale, complexity and intensity. Sherman and I spoke in her West Soho studio shortly before her show closed in New York.

Kenneth Baker: *Are you an only child?*

Cindy Sherman: *Yes. I'm the youngest of five.*

Baker: *Did that give you some impulse toward disguise and impersonation?*

Sherman: Sure.

Baker: *From imitating or resisting the examples of your siblings?*

Sherman: No. It was more like, "Hey, you guys, remember me? I'm here. I can be like this, I can be like that…." There were so many years between me and my siblings. The closest to me is nine years older, the oldest is 19 years older, so that's why I was always wearing after them.

Baker: *At what point did you start scouring the Internet for promptings toward of scanning the street?*

Sherman: I guess when I did the clowns. When I first started shooting the clowns, I tried to use my imagination and made some very successful pieces…. So I was curious what action clowns really look like, beyond circus clowns. And there are just so many people who call themselves clowns. Some of them look very professional and a little too slick…. But then there are some who look very amateurish and they don't look like they're really good at using makeup running, and they look like they're wearing just any old crocodile and a polka-dot T-shirt they found in a thrift store. When I found those sorts of pictures, it seemed like the variety of things I could do was sort of endless.

Baker: *How does one series end and another begin?*

Sherman: There is usually a moment when I say, "I've had enough of this, I'm sick of it," or I feel like I've wanted to repeat myself within a series. That I go into production for the series—there's usually a deadline involved, so I'm ready to move on. But I'm always thinking, "Oh, I could do this, I could do…." I'm sort of drained or distracted from working on it. Clean up my studio and put things away. Even though I might have other ideas on a back burner, a couple of years might go by before I get back into the studio again.

Baker: *What kind of working hours do you keep?*

Sherman: What used to happen is that I'd take a roll of film and shoot it, and maybe do two just to see…. All I'd work with was Polaroids, but sometimes Polaroids, so even using a magnifying glass it wasn't like looking at a negative or a slide…. So then I'd take the makeup off, take the film to the lab, wait two or three hours until it was done, which was always a good time to do errands. Now I feel like I don't have time for errands, and I have to order things online.

Then I'd go pick up the film and find that it was all overexposed, or out of focus, or the lighting was no good. So usually the next day, I'd reboot the whole thing. But now that I'm working digitally, I have everything hooked up to my computer, so I can just take 10 shots and go see how the focus is. And I can see immediately if I've captured what I'm looking for. "Oh, I'm all made up, might as well just keep working." I don't usually work past 10 or eight, but sometimes I feel I have to.

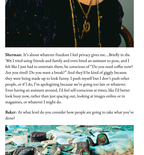
Baker: *Do you think of the photographic object as your work, or do you think of the tableau of the images as your work?*

Sherman: I guess the tendo of the image. I don't think of it as real photography because I don't think people who like real photography think of it that way. People who are real photo fans like the early film stills, the black and white photos from the 1940s photographs, or there are people who collect photographs of, I don't know, Marilyn Monroe, or Elvis, or JFK. I'm the medium I chose to work with…. And I was thinking there aren't many women who do really big machine-y kinds of things…. Usually with the figures I want them to be just a little bit larger than life-size.

Baker: *Why do you work alone? Is it about privacy?*

Sherman: It's about whatever freedom I feel privacy gives me…. Briefly in the '80s I tried using friends and family and even hired an assistant to pose, and I felt like I just had to entertain them, let conversation of "Do you need coffee now? Do you want to take a break?" I felt like I just couldn't focus on what I wanted to do, they were being made up to look funny. I guess I would feel I don't push other people, or I'd feel, I'm apologizing because we're going too late or whatever. Even having an assistant around, I'd feel self-conscious at times. Hey, I'd better look busy now, rather than just spacing out, looking at images online or in magazines, or whatever I might do.

Baker: *At what level do you consider how people are going to take what you've done?*



Sherman: I really don't consider that. My attitude is they're just going to have to take it. There have been times when I made work in response to what was going on, when I began to feel like I was the flavor of the month for a new group of collectors in the early '80s. That's what inspired the pictures with the clowns and the dolls, I thought to myself, "Well, they think it's all, we're with the costumes and making up, so I'm if they put this above that couple." And it worked, they didn't like the look a long time for that and I felt accepted, much less sought after.

Baker: *Is there social critique implied?*

Sherman: Sometimes…. When I did the food shots, people felt that I was making fun of these characters, but I really felt they kind of endeared themselves to me.

There was this idea of having a clown in L.A., right around the time of the Oscars. And L.A. did fill up with all these people who were there to try and make it in Hollywood, and they wind up being waitresses or working in a garage or whatever. Then that one director comes along and says, "I need some fantastic actors for this one scene," and I imagined what they'd try to do as local clowns to promote themselves.

Baker: *Has anyone told you that they recognize themselves in your work?*

Sherman: Yes, in that show and in the society pictures. They didn't point out which ones they mean.

Baker: *In some pictures it looks as if the character is singing or crying. Do you ever visualize when showing?*

Sherman: Yes, I don't. It's all just done in that split second for the camera.

Baker: *What about humor? It seems like there's more license to laugh in some images than others.*

Sherman: I am human in almost everything, in even the grotesque things, because I don't want people to believe in them as if they were documentary that really does them was horror. I want them to be artificial, so you can laugh or giggle at them, as I do when I watch horror movies.

Baker: *And the most difficult work technically?*

Sherman: The clowns were hard because it was really difficult to feel that I was making a character beneath the makeup that would be different to each one, so it wouldn't seem like they were all just my with clown makeup on. That took some work.

Baker: *Do you feel that you've been working out somebody of reconciliation with the world you find yourself in, the body you find yourself in?*

Sherman: For the longest time, up until a couple of years ago, I was trying to free myself in the work, literally and figuratively, so that I would never be recognized. Not just that it wouldn't look like me but that it wouldn't look like a woman. I'd wear a beard and I'd wear a wig, and I'd wear prosthetic noses and I'm not finding the pressure to look kind of kind my age. I didn't want the challenge of constantly trying to reinvent myself or invent new characters, that shouldn't be the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing.

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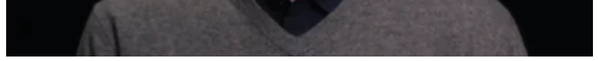

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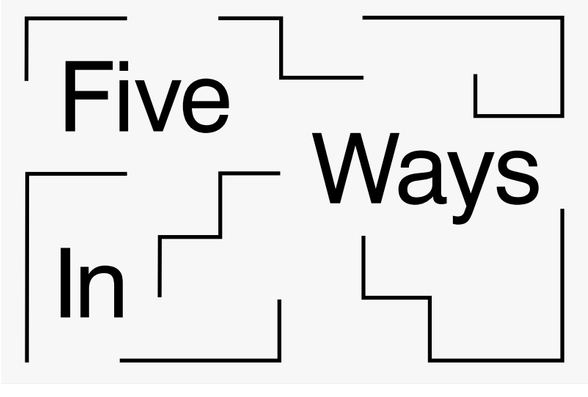

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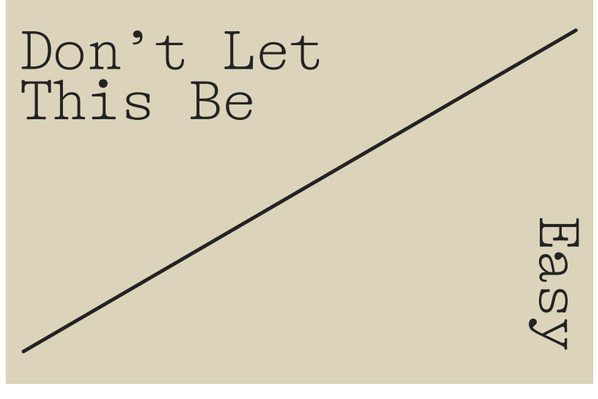

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